

They Look Like Me! Discovering Cultural Mirrors in Children’s Literature

by Deborah Shepherd, Alicia Moore, and Rebecca Giles



“I wish I had been able to read a book like *this when I was younger!*” Each semester, in a Multicultural Children’s Literature course, this same sentiment is heard from many university students of color¹. These words represent the excitement and amazement students express when they are presented with opportunities to research, read, and review multicultural books written for children. Multicultural children’s literature consists of books that describe and illustrate ways of knowing that are particularly relevant to marginalized communities, and highlight culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic, and language diversity. The students in this course successfully found books stocked in the library that had characters that looked and acted like them—but for many, it was the first time. Now, at a time when multicultural books abound, every child, every adolescent -- and every college student, for that matter -- should be given the opportunity to find a representation of themselves on a bookshelf.

During an assignment in which the students are asked to find picture books that reflect their culture, African American students are particularly astounded when they discover books that serve as cultural mirrors. Many of these students share, “I’ve never read a book before where I actually saw myself!” In response, educators at all levels and in all roles (teachers, professors, librarians, and administrators) should seek to present African American students with access to books (and textbooks) that provide them with opportunities to: (1) see their likenesses and their identities on the pages, (2) support identity affirmation, and (3) provide them with literature frameworks that promote the acceptance of themselves

and others. These literature frameworks provide books that promote authenticity and the values of self-empowerment and reflection, along with possibilities for cross-cultural understandings, collaborations, and friendships that can exist in multidimensional real-life settings. These opportunities are strengthened when educators invest in books that serve as “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” (Bishop 1990, p. ix).

The phrase “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” was coined by Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990, p. ix) to connote the intersections of literature, identity, difference, culture, and the value of the lived experiences of the reader. Bishop, widely recognized as the mother of multicultural literature, has paved the way for diverse books to reach the hands of all children waiting to see their identities affirmed (Francis, 2019) and celebrated in the books they read. She is most influential for her advocacy of and scholarship in multicultural literature, which focuses on the need for African American children to see themselves in and through the books available for them to read (Chenoweth, 2019). Bishop describes mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors as follows:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror (Bishop, 1990, p. ix; NCTE, 2016).

Mirror Books: Reflecting and Affirming Lived Experiences

In her writing, Bishop (1990) asserts that books should provide opportunities for African American children to dream, explore, and transform. Mirror books serve as an opportunity for these students to see themselves in the text while simultaneously building their confidence (Smith 1995). Specifically, a case study by Smith (1995) confirmed that African American students “prefer to read texts they can relate to culturally, which increases their interest in reading” (SCIS, 2016, para. 11). Additionally, windows and sliding glass door books may serve as portals that transform students’ understanding of the world around them or transport them into any situation they choose based on the author’s plot; they also offer opportunities for them to see individuals who are culturally similar and/or diverse, and to explore their aspirations for the present and future.

Fortunately, the number of published books that are created by African American authors and illustrators and that feature African American children has increased in recent years (Huyck & Dahlen, 2019). The struggles of racism are not necessarily a primary focus or a central backdrop that permeates the lives of the characters in many of these books, although this theme may be present. Instead, these books often offer storylines and plots that depict diverse characters living joyously across their pages. The stories share opportunities for the reader to learn about the characters, recognize similarities and differences, and realize the value of the characters as they live happy, intentional, and purposeful lives. Multicultural literature serves as a window for children of all cultures to build cross-cultural connections and understandings while also recognizing their own worth. According to Bishop (1990), “literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (Bishop, 1990, as cited in Chenoweth, 2019). Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.

In her 1990 keynote address for the California State University San Bernardino Reading Conference, Bishop discussed three aspects of culture that can serve as mirrors in books for African American children. The first is language (as cited in Atwell et al., 1990). She states, “while on one important

level, we all share the same language, on another level, there are many variations that help to keep that language dynamic and rich” (as cited in Atwell et al., 1990, p.13). Authors such as Eloise Greenfield and Lucille Clifton, for instance, capture a cultural rhythm and style in their books and poetry that may look and sound familiar to some African American children. Bishop’s second cultural aspect is the rich individual and collective histories revealing traditions of black culture (as cited in Atwell et al., 1990). The wife-and-husband team of Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney have written and illustrated more than 70 books about the lives of famous African Americans. Their books, with subjects including Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Sojourner Truth, Alvin Ailey, and Martin Luther King, contribute to children’s understanding of these traditions. The third aspect focuses on cultural values and attitudes (as cited in Atwell et al., 1990). New arrivals like Amanda Gorman’s children’s book *Change Sings* (2021, Viking Books for Young Readers) and Grace Byers’ book *I Am Enough* (2020, Balzer+Bray) exemplify the resilience and dignity of black culture.

Widening the Window: Supporting Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging

Books that affirm children's identities and allow them to feel affirmed in their own skin are extremely important in the development of a healthy racial, cultural, and ethnic identity. These books help to create more authentic and safe spaces for African American children to learn and grow as members of a diverse society. Meanwhile, multicultural literature is tremendously important for students who are not African American, as well. Providing books that serve as windows and sliding doors for some children gives other children an opportunity to see into the lives of the characters who are different from them, thus engendering understanding and empathy (Laminack & Kelly, 2019). When educators fail to provide window and sliding door books, their students may project their current culture and ethnicity throughout the entire world. These cocooned children may be fearful, may struggle to handle situations, or may otherwise react negatively when they encounter people from different cultures and backgrounds. In window books, readers can move between worlds and come to see that their world is not the only world. Rather, it is a valid world connected to many other valid worlds. Therefore,

books that focus on all children's specific identities are necessary when creating spaces that are inclusive and affirming (Francis, 2019).

Behind the Curtain (and the Screen): Disrupting Bias in Social Media Representations

Social media and news outlets continually share incidents and events each day that may negatively affect adolescents' identities, and the ways in which they view and interact with their peers. In addition, even younger children spend an exorbitant amount of time (Common Sense Media, 2019) immersed in content on social media and news outlets. For example, in 2015, Common Sense Media conducted research that "suggests that children between the ages of 8 and 12 years old consume around 5 hours of on-screen media daily, while teenagers consume a little over 7 hours on average" (McCool & Moten, 2020). Some of the content viewed on screen included "outdated cultural depictions" of people of color (Henderson, 2019), including stereotypical dialects and behaviors that may adversely affect students' beliefs about their African American peers. With this fact in mind, educators must recognize the need for greater student support in classrooms to counteract negative stereotypes and their effect on students. This support includes providing opportunities for teachers and students to look behind the proverbial curtains and technological screens (e.g., of cell phones, tablets, and computers, etc.) that shroud and maintain systemic and systematic biases in order to see the more complex, accurate, creative, and appreciative depictions of people who are culturally and ethnically different found in the engaging text and illustrations of multicultural children's literature.

Multicultural literature, particularly books that depict interactions between people from multiple cultures and ethnicities, are valuable teaching tools (Steiner et al., 2008). It can encourage students to embrace change that may circumvent discrimination, regardless of individual differences (Vasquez, 2003). These books increase students' understanding of how discriminatory practices affect children of diverse backgrounds (Nilsson, 2005), while also highlighting their contributions to our schools, society, and nation. Steiner (2001) identifies the specific benefits of using multicultural literature in the classroom, noting that it provides an opportunity for all children to do the following: see themselves in literature, foster the development of positive self-esteem, affirm their

identities, prevent feelings of isolation, and cultivate respect, empathy, and acceptance of others. Further, multicultural literature helps to increase cultural awareness, developing self-awareness, and promote intercultural understanding (Aerila et al., 2016).

Opening the Blinds: Resources for Mirror, Window and Sliding Door Books

Locating books that celebrate diversity and social justice is becoming easier (see Text Box below). Many excellent sources are available for locating picture books that can serve as mirrors for African American children and as windows and sliding glass doors for all children, regardless of background or culture (see Table 1 below). To determine which books and/or internet resources to choose, teachers should ask themselves the following pedagogical questions:

1. How will I create positive cross-cultural relationships through the selected texts?
2. Am I aware of my own cultural biases?
3. Am I familiar with the cultures presented in the books?
4. Am I aware of books that may align with the local, state, and national standards?
5. Am I connecting the book with specific subject matter to reinforce concepts (e.g., math, reading, science)?
6. Have I familiarized myself with sources that will provide me with a selection of books that will meet the needs of my students?

Choosing appropriate multicultural books for use in classrooms involves additional considerations. For example, an [article posted on the K12 Reader website](#) provides ten tips to help teachers choose the best multicultural books for use during reading, including these four:

1. The book avoids offensive expressions, negative attitudes, or stereotypical representations.
2. The events, situations, and objects depicted are historically accurate.
3. The story includes words and phrases from the culture being depicted.
4. The story acknowledges the diversity of experiences within a particular cultural group.

The use of these guidelines, as well as the resources found in the following paragraphs, can help educators to ensure that all children, regardless of their ethnicity, are given the opportunity to find books that affirm and inspire.

Book Awards

The American Library Association (ALA) website identifies books awarded for their excellence in writing and illustration, and it is an excellent place to start a search when looking for books that feature African American characters. The books that have received awards are selected by committees of reviewers with both passion and expertise in children's literature, based on specific criteria. Although the prestigious Coretta Scott King Award has been given to African American authors since 1970 (and since 1974 to African American illustrators), multicultural books increasingly are receiving general children's literature awards, including The Caldecott and The Newbery Awards. The African American Literature Book Club website lists all Caldecott Winning and Honor book awards given to Black authors and illustrators or books featuring African American characters. These awards, and many more, can be found on the [American Library Association's \(ALA\) website](#), which contains a list of book winners through the years who have contributed to the affirmation and appreciation of the lovely diversity found in all children.

Internet Sources

In addition to the ALA website, websites of a variety of other organizations also compile lists of resources, identifying books that can serve as mirror books for African American children. By consulting multiple lists, educators will note that some titles are repeated on multiple lists and also can discover many other less recognized or new releases. Table 1 provides recommendations for getting started, along with websites that are particularly helpful for staying abreast of current bestsellers and new releases or for locating books on social justice themes. To access a variety of books that share Black joy and showcase empowering messages, we recommend the [Honoring Black Lives Virtual Library](#). This website, created by Jillian Heise, recognizes and honors the work of Black creatives in the children's literature industry. Also among the resources are several blogs that compile monthly book lists of newly released multicultural books.

Authors and Illustrators

Conducting searches on the authors and illustrators who create the books that appear on these lists is another way to find powerful books that celebrate diversity. Some are prolific, including Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney, as we have already mentioned; Jaqueline Woodson, another prolific poet and author, has written more than 30 books about the African American experience and won a multitude of awards, including the National Book Award. Other authors whose work has provided *mirror* books for generations of African American children include Nikki Giovanni, Eloise Greenfield, Julius Lester, Faith Ringgold, Patricia McKissack, Jerry Pinkney, and Pat Cummings. Some new and up-and-coming authors include Jamilah Thompkins Bigelow, Academy Award Winner Lupita Nyong'o, Derrick Barnes, Varian Johnson, and Matthew A. Cherry. As more diverse authors and illustrators continue to make their mark, and with the help of these resources, children should never again have to say, "*I wish I had had a book like this when I was young.*"

Author Note:

¹In this article, the term "of color" is **referenced when used by cited authors** and broadly refers to the racial identities of students who are not only African American, but also Native American, Latinx, Arab American, and Asian American and other racial, cultural, or ethnic identities that may be reflected in the lived experiences of students.

Textbox: Exemplary video, digital, audio, and multimodal resources that can serve as mirrors for African American youth can be found on the internet; however, the engaging illustrations and often simple, but powerful, text of multicultural children's books are particularly impactful in "opening the blinds" to the adverse effects of negative stereotypes.

Table 1***Recommended Resources for Discovering Mirror, Window, and Sliding Door Books***

Category	Resource	Description
Book Awards	<u>Coretta Scott King Award</u>	This award is presented annually to an author/illustrator whose books best exemplify an appreciation of African American life and culture, along with universal human values.
	<u>John Steptoe Award for New Talent</u>	Using the same eligibility criteria as the Coretta Scott King Award, this award is presented to writers or illustrators who have not published more than three works.
	<u>Jane Addams Children’s Book Award</u>	This award recognizes children’s literature that promotes children’s consideration of peace, social justice, global community, and equity for all people.
	<u>“The Walter”</u>	The Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children’s Literature recognizes a book whose main character is a person of color, Native American, LGBTQIA, a person with a disability, and/or a member of a marginalized religious or cultural minority in the United States and that addresses diversity in a meaningful way.
Internet Resources	<u>Africa Access Review</u>	Africa Access is a nonprofit organization founded in 1989 to improve the quality of the K-12 book collections about Africa in schools and libraries in the United States. Its list of Children’s Africana Book Award winners and honors is divided into sections for young children and older readers.
	<u>Top 150 Recommended African American Children’s Books</u>	This site lists the top 154 African American picture books from 1972-2020, compiled by the African American Children’s Book Project (AACBP).
	<u>Black Picture Books that Aren’t About Boycotts, Buses, or Basketball</u>	This list, compiled by Scott Woods--a librarian, writer, poet, and critic--identifies books that focus on the everyday lives of Black characters, rather than on the struggles that tend to dominate historical views of people of color.
	<u>Broadening the Story: 60 Picture Books Starring Black Mighty Girls</u>	Dedicated to amplifying the voices of Black girls, this website includes a list of 60 picture books featuring Black “Mighty Girls” as characters.
	<u>The Brown Bookshelf (PB bookshelf)</u>	The goal of this website is to promote awareness of the myriad of Black voices writing for young readers. One of their projects--28 Days Later--showcases the best books by Black authors and illustrators for each of the 28 days of Black History Month,

Category	Resource	Description
Internet Resources	<u>Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature</u>	The center is among the leading educational research centers in the field of multicultural literature. It seeks to preserve the richness of the many cultures in the field of children's and young adult literature and to provide children, teachers, parents, educators, students, and librarians access to multicultural children's books.
	<u>Imagination Soup</u>	This site lists picture book biographies of famous African American men and women in categories such as science, activism, and leadership.
	<u>We Need Diverse Books</u>	This grassroots organization includes children's book lovers who created The Walter Award and advocates for diversity in the publishing industry. It provides resources for addressing race, equity, anti-racism, and inclusion in the classroom, including links to book lists for numerous categories of diversity.
	<u>What We Do All Day</u>	The focus of this site is to identify books that combat racism and teach readers how to talk about it.
	<u>Black Children's Books and Authors (BCBA)</u>	A monthly list of new releases, promotes awareness of children's and young adult literature by Black authors, both traditional and self-published.
	<u>Grassroots Community Foundation: Marley Dias's 1000 Black Girl Books</u>	This site lists 1,000 titles featuring Black girls as the main characters. The creators of the guide are still cataloging books and providing updates of new book titles monthly.
	<u>Mahogany Books: Black Books Matter</u>	The website showcases books that represent the interests of the Black community and provides a list of the best-selling picture books every month.
	<u>The Tutu Teacher</u>	Kindergarten teacher, presenter, and consultant Vera Ahiyya compiles a list of newly released diverse books each month on her blog.
	<u>No Time for Flash Cards</u>	This blog is designed as an educator's resource and includes a list of picture books to teach social justice to young children.
	<u>Social Justice Book List</u>	The nonprofit organization, Teaching for Change, has compiled more than 60 lists covering a range of social justice and multicultural themes.
	<u>Picture This and Just One More Page</u>	Every year the Wisconsin State Reading Association evaluates recently published books that emphasize diversity, authenticity and artistry and compiles a recommendation list.
	<u>Today's Parent</u>	The website contains a list of 30 books to help parents talk to their kids about racism, as well as general parenting information.

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